



It Happens on the Pavement: The Role of Cities in Addressing Migration and Violent Extremism – Challenges and Opportunities

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The [Prevention Project](#) and the [Brookings Institution](#) convened a roundtable of representatives from governments, think-tanks and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to discuss the challenges and opportunities cities are facing as they seek to address the global crises of migration and violent extremism. The discussion centered on the ways in which violent extremism and migration challenges can intersect: 1) migrants or refugees may be targeted by terrorist recruiters; 2) flows of refugees and migrants may be infiltrated by terrorist groups; 3) the continuing arrival of migrants and refugees may generate extreme reactions from host and other communities; and 4) ensuring that today's refugees and migrants do not become tomorrow's violent extremists. Participants focused on the role of cities in addressing these dimensions of the challenge and the extent to which managing the refugee and migration crisis and preventing violent extremism in cities should be addressed in an integrated manner or whether the issues should be treated separately.

An unofficial summary of the discussion follows:

What are the connections between the migration and violent extremism challenges?

- Participants highlighted the timely nature of the roundtable given the recent terrorist attacks committed by refugees and migrants, the strains that cities in Europe and elsewhere are under as a result of trying to absorb the millions of people fleeing the violence in Iraq and Syria, as well as to prevent their citizens from being recruited to join the Islamic State or other terrorist groups, and the high-level refugee and migration conferences at the UN General Assembly meetings in New York next month.
- Participants underscored the need to be mindful of the use of the terms “migrants’ and “refugees” and not lump them together, particularly when using them in a discussion about the politically charged topic of violent extremism. It was noted that many of those responsible for recent terrorist attacks in Europe are second-generation immigrants; some are well-off individuals who immigrated and others are refugees who came to Europe out of need. It was also pointed out that many violent extremists – often second generation immigrants – have significant identify issues, while refugees tend to have fewer of them.
- Whether talking about migrants or refugees, however, participants cautioned against viewing these communities through a security lens at the outset. The point was made that if

the violent extremism and migration/refugee conversations are integrated from the beginning we may end up inadvertently exacerbating the problem we are trying to avoid.

- In this context it was noted that despite the increasing intersection of these challenges, **CVE issues have not been part of the conversation in the preparations for the upcoming high-level events on refugees and migration in New York and are not expected to feature on the agenda of either meeting. Among the reasons cited by the participants were: 1) concerns about the securitization of the humanitarian space and 2) that these issues are handled by different parts of national and international bureaucracies, parts which do not have a history of cooperating with each other.**
- **Participants also highlighted the importance of having a common understanding of what is “violent extremism”, i.e., it is *not* views expressed by peaceful political opponents or religious or ethnic minorities, and what is “CVE”, i.e., it is *not* throwing bloggers in jail, shutting down civil society organizations in the name of security, but which only creates more marginalization.** Such clarity is particularly important given the increasing vitriol, including among some politicians, which has generated calls from some quarters for the closing of borders to those fleeing violence in Iraq and Syria and the labeling of Muslim migrants and refugees a security threat.

Can effective social integration policies today prevent the growth of violent extremism tomorrow?

- Participants underscored how **successful integration of newcomers is directly related to the prevention of radicalization because it decreases the vulnerability of groups within a community from being recruited into terrorism.**
- In this context, participants highlighted the need to look at cities’ social integration policies to ensure that migrants and refugees are effectively integrated into the community. It was noted, for example, that Gothenburg’s (Sweden), northeastern neighborhoods, which is generally where the city’s migrants and refugees have been settled over the years, has more violence, more crowded housing, worse schools, and fewer job opportunities than those parts of the city where ethnic Swedes live.
- These neighborhoods have supplied the highest per capita percentage of foreign fighters in all of Sweden and perhaps all of Western Europe. With more than a hundred thousand asylum seekers fleeing the conflict in Syrian and Iraq knocking on Sweden’s door, participants asked whether the same social integration policies that may have contributed to the sense of alienation that led to the high number of foreign fighters would be applied.
- In general, participants underscored **the importance of ensuring the development and implementation of policies that cohesively integrate displaced communities into the broader municipal society through programs which build language skills, education, and community relations.** Resettlement, participants stressed, is not just about addressing material needs, but must include a holistic approach that offers mentorship and psychological counselling that can be provided within the first six months upon arrival and sustained.

Building Healthy Communities

- Participants underscored how building healthy communities will contribute to the kind of social cohesion that can help ensure effective integration of the new arrivals into the wider society and prevent violent extremism. This requires ensuring that voices from all parts of the community, including migrants and refugees, religious leaders, and educators are heard, and there are opportunities for addressing local grievances.
- The point was made that, whether in the context of integrating new arrivals into or preventing violent extremism from taking root in cities, **there should be a community-level process for ensuring the diversity of views are heard on a regular basis, with participants highlighting some of the risks of including law enforcement at the table, particularly at the outset.**
- To maintain its credibility, participants mentioned that the process must provide community members, including new arrivals, an outlet for addressing the grievances that are being aired. In this vein it was noted that the private sector should be encouraged to participate in the process and help support economic and other opportunities.
- Participants pointed to the parallels between violent extremism and gang violence, e.g., the turn to violence, an initiation into a hierarchical community, internal sympathy from those already in the community and how **lessons for reducing urban gang violence, e.g., empowerment of mayors, increasing involvement of the community, and social, including mental health, support can and should be applied to city-led CVE efforts.**

Cities are on the front-lines, but often lack a voice or resources

- Many of the cities grappling with how to prevent their young people from being successfully recruited to join a terrorist group or how to reintegrate “formers”, are taking in large number of migrants – mainly those fleeing the conflict in Syria and Iraq and wider Near East region. Participants noted that the challenges they face in terms of integration –from housing, to labor, to education, to wider set of social services – are demanding. **In this context, participants said that ensuring the necessary funding for education and that refugees have the right to work should be a particular priority.**
- It was noted that new arrivals can provide an economic boost to their local community. If not, then marginalization and alienation may lead to ghettoization and ultimately drive some to extremism and even violence, as has been the case in some cities in Europe. More generally, as has been witnessed recently in Germany, the increasing number of migrants and refugees can generate extreme reactions from host communities, which can include an uptick in xenophobia and even violence against the new arrivals.
- Participants drew attention to the City of Houston, which has an Office of International Communities and Refugee Affairs to “promote the well-being and connectedness of the city’s immigrants, expatriates, and refugees by supporting their civic and cultural integration.” The office, often in partnership with community-based organizations, offers programs and services for these members of the Houston community.
- Participants recognized this as a good practice that other cities with significant immigrant and refugee populations may wish to follow. However, it was noted that cities in a number

of countries (particularly in the developing world) are not provided the authority or resources (or allowed to generate the resources through local taxes) to support such a program.

- **Despite the fact that cities are on the front lines for dealing with these challenges – and are often best-placed to design and implement innovative multi-agency programs to address them - it was noted that they generally do not have a voice in the relevant national or international-level policy discussions and, as noted above, are often starved for resources.** This can leave the people who are actually doing the hard work on the ground frustrated.
- Participants noted that refugee, migration, and asylum policies are the responsibility of national governments, as is national security, with local authorities more often than not excluded from these national level discussions. **Participants underscored the importance of ensuring that local voices, including those of city officials grappling with these challenges, are reflected in policy discussions on these topics at the national and global levels**
- While acknowledging that the resources are either not or too slowly making their way down to the local levels, the point was made that there is always a concern in mayor’s offices about lack of funding to support work across a range of issues. **However, some of the work needed to build the kind of community cohesion that can help with the integration of new arrivals and prevent violent extremism is not expensive.** This includes setting up community-platforms for airing grievances and addressing small concerns that demonstrate that the city takes the concerns of all members of the community seriously.

Decentralization Matters

- Participants discussed some of the challenges donors face engaging on these issues in countries where power is centralized in the capital. The point was made that the most highly centralized countries are often the ones facing the most significant violent extremism problems. **The growing trend towards decentralization was recognized and the prospect that this would lead to greater empowerment of municipalities and localities in countries in the Middle East and North Africa, for example, thus also influence funding flows.** In this context it was noted that the World Bank, although its primary purpose is to help and work with national governments, has put in place municipal development funds in certain countries, which provide credit to local governments and to other institutions investing in local infrastructure.

The Framing Matters

- **Participants discussed the importance of ensuring that local programs aimed at building social cohesion, whether in the context of dealing with refugee and migration or violent extremism issues, are framed in way that will resonate most strongly with the target communities.** For example, in Jordan, violent extremism is just one form of violence affecting local communities, but is not the one Jordanians are most concerned with. Thus, a community-level “CVE” program is unlikely to get much support from the targeted local group. However, a program framed around violence reduction more broadly – even if the donor views it as a CVE initiative – is.

- Whereas mayors and the communities they represent may view the problems more broadly, e.g., building social cohesion or reducing violence, participants highlighted this is often at odds with some of the narrow and rigid requirements of some donors, which prefer (whether for budgeting or other bureaucratic reasons) to view the problem narrowly, e.g., as crime, migration, refugees, or violent extremism. **The focus, participants agreed, should be on developing a locally-driven approach to solving problems – using a local framing of the problem – with international donors then prepared, where appropriate, to help fund such solutions, rather than seeking to impose an external framing.**

City-to-City Sharing

- Participants highlighted the increasing number of cities that are serving as laboratories for developing and testing innovative initiatives that build social cohesion and strengthen community resilience whether in the context of managing the influx of new arrivals or preventing violent extremism or violence more broadly.
- **The point was also made that Mayors are under intense expectations to “get things done” and cities spend an enormous amount of time watching and learning from each other.** Unlike at the national level, where geopolitical issues can impede practical cooperation among governments, **the barriers to horizontal cooperation among cities are few.** Thus, as cities innovate in these areas relevant mechanisms that exist (e.g., the Strong Cities Network) for facilitating the sharing of lessons learned among municipalities need to be leveraged and new ones developed where necessary. The example of C40 – a network of the world’s megacities committed to addressing climate change and which supports cities to collaborate, share knowledge, and drive meaningful action on climate change – was cited as a best practice for promoting horizontal cooperation among cities and for cities influencing the international-level discussions around a global problem.

Germany – Lessons Learned?

- Participants underscored that the outcome of the current refugee and migration crisis in Europe will depend on the performance of cities and the communities that comprise them as much as on national-level decisions. They considered how German cities are adapting to the influx of 1.5 million people in a short period of time. **It was pointed out that while the federal government is enacting legislation and setting asylum policy, while trying to satisfy the diverse interests of different political parties, German cities – like cities across Europe and in countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey – have a practical responsibility to deliver for their communities.** They are thus taking the lead in developing the integration policies and programs, e.g., focusing on education and housing, with a portion of funding coming from the federal level, where the German city states have a voice, but other German cities do not. **Given the front-line role that cities play here, the point was made that all cities across Germany grappling with the crisis need to be part of the national-level conversation taking place to ensure they reflect the needs of ordinary citizens and their local representatives charged with delivering critical services to them.**
- Despite the fact that federal funding is never close to sufficient to cover the local needs, German cities continue to push forward with the tasks needed to properly integrate their populations to minimize problems in future. If German cities are able to put forward a set of innovations in this space – ones that successfully manage the political rhetoric and risk of

polarization in this area – it will attract a lot of attention from cities across Europe and in places like Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey that are looking at how best to manage the integration of tens of thousands of newcomers into their societies.

- Among the questions confronting Germany now are whether it can avoid ending up with the type of segregated enclaves that have bedeviled some other countries in Europe? Will Germany be able to deliver on the promise that the incoming refugee population can be educated and outfitted with the skills to fill the significant labor vacuum the economy resulting from the large number of Germans who will soon be retiring?